DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 480 741 EA 032 741

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TITLE	Afterschool Programs. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, Eugene, OR.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-EA-03-08
PUB DATE	2003-09-00
NOTE	4p.; Digest number 171.
CONTRACT	ED-99-CO-0011
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, 5207 University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403-5207. Tel: 541-346-2332; Tel: 800-438-8841 (Toll Free); Fax: 541-346-2334; Web site: http://eric.uoregon.edu. For full text: http://eric/publications/digests/digest171.html.
PUB TYPE	ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	After School Education; *After School Programs; Elementary Secondary Education; Extended School Day; *Extracurricular Activities; In Loco Parentis; School Activities; *School Responsibility; *School Role
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

Afterschool programs are increasingly viewed as one viable way of bridging the gap between the end of the school day and the time parents get home from work. This digest briefly discusses why afterschool programs are needed, what potential benefits may be, what challenges may affect the viability of programs, what factors are identified with high-quality programs, and what policy issues need to be addressed. Afterschool programs are needed because there are many risks associated with leaving children and youth unsupervised during afterschool hours. Several studies have found a number of benefits result from participation in high-quality afterschool programs, including better grades, work habits, emotional adjustment, and peer relations. The biggest challenges facing the viability of afterschool programs are related to staffing, funding, and transportation. It is generally agreed that retaining skilled staff is a key in the success of afterschool programs. To date, there has been little systematic and conclusive research on afterschool programs, and policy issues are not fully developed in most communities. (WFA)

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ED 480 741

ERIC Educational Resources Information Center

DIGEST

Afterschool Programs.

ERIC Digest No. 171

EDO-EA-03-08

September 2003

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ERIC DIGEST

SEPTEMBER 2003 NUMBER 171 EDO-EA-03-08

Afterschool Programs

By Linda Lumsden

According to Jodi Wilgoren of the *New York Times* (2000), recent growth in afterschool programming "represents nothing less than the reimagining of the school day for the first time in generations."

Afterschool programs are increasingly viewed as one viable way of bridging the gap between the end of the school day and the time parents get home from work. They have the potential to provide a safe, supervised place for children and youth to participate in constructive activities and form positive relationships with peers and adults. Such programs may also supplement what children and youth learn during the regular school day and expose students to a wide array of enrichment opportunities that promote cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and moral growth and development.

The caliber of afterschool programs varies widely, however, and so it is important for administrators and policymakers to be familiar with factors that tend to set apart high-quality programs. Otherwise, millions of children may end up being "warehoused in inadequate programs" (Grossman 2002).

This Digest briefly discusses why afterschool programs are needed, what potential benefits may be, what challenges may affect the viability of programs, what factors are identified with high-quality programs, and what policy issues need to be addressed.

Why Are Afterschool Programs Needed?

More than twenty-eight million school-age children have parents who are employed, and between seven and fifteen million children go home to an empty house on any given day. According to research conducted by the Urban Institute, "an estimated 4 million 6- to 12-year-olds with employed mothers... are regularly without adult supervision when not at school" (Capizzano and others 2000).

There are many risks associated with leaving children and youth without supervision during afterschool hours. When children are in "self-care" rather than supervised, their personal safety as well as their emotional security can be compromised. For older youth, being unsupervised after school increases the likelihood that they will become involved in criminal activity, develop a substance-abuse problem, or engage in early sexual activity or other high-risk behaviors. Both juvenile crime and victimization of children and youth peak between the hours of 3 and 6 p.m. (Wilgoren).

The younger children are when they are left alone and the more hours they are unsupervised, the greater the probability they will be adversely affected.

In one study, sixth-graders who had been unsupervised regularly between first and third grade were less socially competent and had lower grades than a control group. A study of nearly 5,000 eighth-graders found that those who took care of themselves for eleven or more hours a week were twice as likely to smoke, drink, or use marijuana than those who were not in self-care after school (Richardson and others 1989).

Schools are increasingly assuming a role in addressing the needs of children and youth during afterschool hours. In a survey conducted by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) in 2001, two-thirds of respondents from schools serving prekindergarten through eighth-grade students offered afterschool programs, up dramatically from 1988, when only 22 percent of principals surveyed offered such programs.

However, afterschool programs are "unevenly distributed across and within communities" (Larner and others 1999). Children in low-income neighborhoods typically have the fewest afterschool options, and available programs in these neighborhoods "tend to address risks and problems rather than cultivating children's skills" (Larner and others).

What Characteristics and Benefits Are Associated with High-Quality Afterschool Programs?

According to Tori DeAngelis (2001), "There's no consensus on what makes for a 'good' afterschool program." Issues that are debated include whether programs should target disadvantaged youth or all youth, and whether they should have an academic focus, an enrichment focus, or incorporate both. "Politicians tend to support an academic focus because grades are easy to measure and national competitiveness is a top concern," while psychologists and social scientists tend to believe that if more holistic models of youth development are adopted, academic benefits will follow (DeAngelis).

Of course, programs must be age appropriate, so those designed for younger children will look very different from those intended to attract teens. Variation in program design and implementation will also be evident across sites due to unique strengths and needs inherent in individual neighborhoods and communities.

According to Jean Baldwin Grossman (2002), head of a research team that spent five years studying the benefits and challenges of school-based afterschool programs, "the best programs we saw offered a range of interesting, engaging activities—not just homework and tutoring—and were based on the children's current interests, such as sports or cooking. These programs pull low-achieving students in the door with the enticement of learning in a fun way, and get them to stay for a rich mix of academic and nonacademic learning that they would likely avoid if the enticements weren't part of the package."

Good afterschool programs designed for older youth are most effective when they view "youth as resources to be developed rather than as problems to be managed," according to Jodie Roth and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn (2001).

In several studies spanning more than ten years, University of Wisconsin researcher Deborah Vandell and her colleagues found a host of benefits result from participation in high-quality afterschool programs by elementary-school-age children. These include better grades, work habits, emotional adjustment, and peer relations (Newell Eaton and Jane Quinn). Other studies have reported similar positive effects of afterschool programs, including "improvements in students' social skills, the ability to maintain self-control and avoid conflicts and to make constructive choices about their personal behavior" (Eaton and Quinn).

What Challenges May Affect the Viability of Afterschool Programs?

Inadequate staffing, funding, and transportation are the three biggest factors

that can jeopardize afterschool programs, according to principals surveyed by NAESP (Bowman 2001).

The National Institute on Out-of-School Time characterizes the afterschool work force as being "in a state of crisis plagued by chronic staff turnover, which can often cripple a program's quality, delivery, and outcomes." In addition, the afterschool field consists primarily of part-time employees, "offers very low compensation and lacks a professional development system unified by a core body of knowledge, a career matrix, a system of training, or a registry of providers" (NIOST). Some preliminary efforts are being made to build a stable, high-quality afterschool work force through credentials, staff development, training, and better financial compensation.

Finding and maintaining stable funding is an ongoing challenge for nearly all afterschool programs. Programs often disappear because sufficient alternate funding sources are not found before initial startup grants expire.

Securing appropriate physical space and arranging for transportation of participants can also be problematic.

What Factors Influence the Long-Term Success of Afterschool Programs?

It is essential to allow adequate time for planning and program development prior to implementation. An initial period of relationship-building that leads to collaboration among all the players—including providers, funders, schools, and government agencies—can facilitate cross-pollination of ideas, clarify roles and responsibilities of all partners, and prevent duplication of services (Grossman, Walker, and Raley 2000).

According to Adrienne Bloom, who coordinated Seattle's $2.2 million Making the Most of Out-of-School Time (MOST) initiative, an important first step in creating a successful program consists of doing a community assessment to find out who is currently providing out-of-school care and what the needs of families are.

It is also important to hire a full-time afterschool coordinator to manage day-to-day program operations and build strong linkages between afterschool programs and the regular school day.

When school personnel, afterschool providers, and community partners share a vision of what students need to learn to succeed in school and in life, and understand the unique contribution each learning environment can make, afterschool programs will be enhanced.

Not surprisingly, staffing has a significant effect on program quality and outcomes. Grossman argues that "having a high-quality staff is a key—perhaps *the* key—to success." In one study that looked at four indicators of program quality, "relationships between adults and youth was consistently the strongest" indicator. In high-quality programs, "staff worked hard to make time with youth both fun and meaningful" and exuded a natural fondness for young people (Walker and others).

The MOST initiative in Seattle is addressing the problem of staff turnover indirectly by creating new professional roles and building a career ladder in the out-of-school-care field. When a career ladder of expanded roles exists (instead of just line staff and program director positions), people have more incentives to stay in the field (Boss 2002).

What Policy Issues Need To Be Addressed?

Only a small number of strong studies of afterschool programs have been conducted, say Larner and colleagues (1999), who note that methodological challenges have plagued many studies. These authors recommend initiating a limited number of rigorous evaluations of afterschool models. According to Larner and others, evaluations should be theory driven, operate on a wide scale, and estimate a variety of outcome measures.

Noam and colleagues (2002) also note the lack of "systematic and conclusive research" on afterschool programs to inform practice. They researched existing knowledge and practices in order to help "scaffold" the field's development and provide a coherent plan of action.

As the policy vacuum of the past begins to be filled it is "critical that policymakers proceed carefully to design programs that will truly meet the needs of the children and youths they intend to serve" (Seligson 1999).

In communities where multiple afterschool programs exist, the programs must decide how to relate to each other. Larner and colleagues emphasize the importance of collaboration among programs to avoid destructive competition and duplication of services.

It is also "imperative that program developers establish measures of success and document the results," according to a report by the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation (2000).

As a result of growing awareness that "what happens out of school is vitally important to setting the stage for success in school, and in later life" (Grossman), broad-based public support is helping to pave the way for those committed to improving and expanding afterschool offerings available to children and youth.

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